Files Management

Introduction

Filing is the process of categorizing records for effective storage and retrieval. The basic element in this process is the record series. A record series is a distinct collection of records with similar characteristics — i.e., content of subject matter, types of documents, or identical retention periods (see II-1).

Files management involves analysis of the arrangement and sorting of record series, and is undertaken to achieve control of records systems. Factors considered in this analysis include:

1. **Material** to be filed.

2. **Arrangement techniques** — i.e., classification and access systems, and

3. **Equipment and supplies.**

Objectives

The objectives of a files management program are to provide efficient and economical arrangement and sorting of active records and to implement a filing system that allows information to be retrieved rapidly and with ease whenever it is needed.

General Principles of Files Management

Role of Records Management Techniques

Specific records management techniques used as files management tools are:

1. **Record Disposition** — Inactive material and records which have satisfied their retention requirements should be removed from active files. This is accomplished by using records retention schedules and following the statewide disposal process of records destruction or transfer to an archives (see II-4 and IV-2).

2. **Records Storage** — Semi-current files should be transferred to a records storage

center, unless volumes are so minimal that transfer would not be cost effective (see section III). The expense of storing semi-current records in prime office space is not cost justifiable. Semi-current records can be kept more economically in a records storage center since reference activity is low and because they are not needed for daily business. Also, the presence of semi-current records reduces retrieval efficiency in active files.

Files Management Considerations

After transfer of semi-current records and disposition of inactive records has been achieved, the following steps must be taken:

1. **File analysis** — Officials must determine which items to file. This process includes the discarding of duplicate copies of documents unless the copies contain valuable notes and comments.

2. **File preparation** — File folders should be labeled neatly and consistently.

3. **File arrangement** — Files should be categorized in the simplest manner possible so that a minimum amount of time is required for retrieval. Filing system categories must correspond with organizational function rather than structure. This is especially important since organizational structure is subject to frequent change, while functions generally remain constant.

4. **File placement** — Items should be put into files on a regular basis — i.e., daily or weekly, depending on the amount of items accumulated. It is important to note that records should be filed in appropriate file equipment.

5. **File access procedures** — A central file or cross reference index should be established and a charge-out system used for borrowing files. Duplication should be strictly regulated, with the charge-out system replacing the need to photocopy documents.

6. **File creation** — New files should be created as they are needed. File titles should be unique to the new subjects. A specific subject title, project title, or general title which indicates a common factor linking all documents in a particular file, is essential to an efficient filing system. Lack of specific filing, such as the use of miscellaneous files, is inefficient because it requires lengthy searches for records in alternate locations. ***"Miscellaneous" should never be used as a file title or label.***

Files Management Process

File Audit

A file audit is the first step in developing a files management program because knowledge of record holdings as well as current filing practices is necessary before an appropriate filing system is instituted. An audit requires a listing of record holdings, and can either be a simple checklist or a detailed report, depending upon the requirements of each office.

A records inventory (see II-2) can be used in place of a file audit. An inventory will not only supply identical information, but will also provide additional details which can be useful in other records management applications. A Records Series Inventory form (see Appendix C) should be used to compile this information.

Once an inventory or audit is completed, inefficiencies can be identified and remedied. A filing system should then be audited after it has been functioning for at least a year. Files may also be selected for storage or destruction during inventories or audits. This saves time and avoids additional work.

Filing Systems

Classification

Classification refers to the method of determining and arranging subjects in a file series based on an evaluation of future retrieval needs. A classification system should be logical, standardized and practical, and use the simplest terms available. It should be based on function, and be exclusive so that subject categories are not redundant. Finally, it should be flexible enough to permit future expansion. Classification systems are alphabetic, numeric or alphanumeric. All other systems are variations of these basic types. Classification is the most important part of a filing system.

Alphabetic Classification

Alphabetic classification is ideal for a simple filing system with a very low volume of files, generally under 1,000. Alphabetic systems involve filing by subject name. A name could be that of a particular project, company, individual, or geographic location. This type of system requires consistent application. For example, if one person creates a file entitled, “Trenton Warehouse Project,” all subsequent documents should be marked with this title so that they are filed in the “Trenton Warehouse Project” file. If not, someone unfamiliar with this project file could file new documents in the “Urban Property” file.

Numeric Classification

Numeric systems are most useful where there are a large volume of files, generally ranging from 1,000-10,000 files. Invoices, checks, and requisitions are most often requested by number. However, numeric filing systems require cross references for instances in which a number is not known. For example, real property can be listed numerically by block and lot numbers, with alphabetic cross references available by street address or by owners.

Numeric systems also require maintenance. If numbers are unclear, or are transposed when typed or written, records can easily be misfiled. There are several types of numeric systems: straight numeric, duplex numeric (including middle-digit indexing and terminal-digit indexing), decimal filing systems (e.g., the Dewey Decimal System), and chronological systems. Each system has advantages and disadvantages which should be weighed before being instituted.

Duplex numeric systems are most useful in situations with a very large number of files, generally 10,000 or more. A duplex numeric system consists of segmented file numbers divided into distinct groups that are sequentially arranged, and includes middle and terminal digit systems:

1. **Middle digit systems** — The middle section is the primary division or file drawer identification; the left section is the secondary division or guide identification; and, the right section is the tertiary division or folder identification.

2. **Terminal digit system** — The right section, or terminal digits are the primary or file drawer identification; the middle digits are the secondary or file guide identification; and the left section is the tertiary or file folder identification.

Both middle and terminal digit systems are used for very large file series, such as patient and insurance policy files, so that filing and retrieval can be spread evenly throughout the filing system.

Alphanumeric Classification

Alphanumeric systems include a number/letter combination in which files are arranged in a general category by subjects, i.e., alphabetically and then assigned numbers for subdivisions. This method of filing is not usually found in office applications and is most often reserved for library classification.

Access Considerations

Criteria used in selecting a filing system include the types of access the user has, or wants to have, to a file and the classification system.

Access can be either direct or indirect. With a direct access method, no index is necessary to search the files. Subject categories are listed as complete words. Therefore, a direct access filing system must be alphabetic. Direct access allows a user to browse through the files. If the filing system is properly arranged, less time is spent in filing and searching. Moreover, users can readily determine where the record series begins and ends.

An indirect access method employs the use of a code which requires an index as a cross reference. By using the indirect access method, browsing is not possible. Although indirect access is especially useful for maintaining files that require confidentiality, maintaining an index can be time-consuming.

Access and Classification Aids

Color Coding — An important aid that can be used in records access and classification systems is color coding. Associating one or more colors with a subject or number assists in file identification and control and reduces eye fatigue. Misfiles are reduced since an incorrectly placed file will be detected easily.

Filing Equipment and Supplies

General Considerations

Since approximately 70 per cent of the expense of maintaining a filing system involves labor costs, county agencies and authorities can realize significant savings through the selection of equipment that aids filing and retrieval efforts. In choosing equipment, the following criteria must be evaluated:

1. **General cost effectiveness** — The expense of equipment, repairs, operations, supplies and floor space should be considered in relationship to the annual growth rate of files and budgetary levels. Three elements which determine the general cost effectiveness of a filing system are:

    a. **Space efficiency** — The capacity of a room or area should be evaluated for accessibility to equipment and files.

    b. **Equipment efficiency** — Acquiring equipment that provides effective file storage and retrieval at the lowest possible cost per file inch is a major concern when purchasing equipment. Another factor may include potential of equipment to be updated, modified or augmented.

    c. **Equipment security** — Purchases must be made with due consideration given to the ability of equipment to discourage unauthorized access and to protect records against fire.

Types of Filing Equipment

When choosing filing equipment, factors such as size and volume of records, anticipated retrieval functions, and the physical limitations of an office, especially amounts of available space, must be considered based on budgetary considerations and cost-benefit analyses (see Appendix D, Cost Comparison Chart). Types of filing equipment include but are not limited to vertical cabinets, lateral cabinets, open shelving and combinations of mobile and mechanized equipment. The following is a general guideline of advantages and disadvantages of these kinds of equipment:

1. **Vertical cabinets** — One of the most commonly used items of filing equipment, these cabinets generally provide 25 filing inches per drawer. Vertical cabinets are most efficient in small offices where a limited number are needed. However, as the number of cabinets needed increases, space efficiency decreases because of the large amount of office space required for their use.

2. **Lateral cabinets** — The popularity of these cabinets for general office use has increased in recent years due their space efficiency and easy accessibility. The most common lateral cabinets are 36 or 42 inches wide and hold 32 or 38 inches of files per drawer, respectively. A vertical cabinet will hold only 25 inches of filing per drawer.

    Another advantage of lateral cabinets is their versatility. These cabinets can be adapted, by the addition or deletion of an internal bar, for either letter or legal size filing.

3. **Open shelving** — This alternative is usually much more economical than vertical or lateral cabinets in terms of cost per filing inch to square foot of floor space. Open shelving permits faster eye contact and retrieval of files, as well as multiple user access. However, because shelves are not enclosed in the same manner as filing cabinets, they do not offer the same protection from fire or water damage or security against unauthorized access, unless shelves are installed in a secured, fireproof vault or have pull-down doors.

4. **Mobile shelving** — This configuration can provide the lowest cost per filing inch to square foot of floor space. Mobile shelving consists of shelving units installed on tracks for movement. An aisle can be created between any two units in order to gain access to a particular unit.

   A "mechanical assist" is a device which aids the user in moving shelves, and can be added to the units. Units can also be motorized to provide faster and easier access to shelves. It is important to note that access can be severely limited in mobile shelving configurations because only one section at a time can be used.

   Mobile systems can be tailored to suit a particular office. Generally, however, the amount of user access decreases as the depth of shelving aisles increases. Mobile shelving can provide security because units can be pushed together with the end unit covered and the entire system locked. This feature also provides some protection against fire and water damage.

   Mobile shelving has cost and floor load disadvantages. Weight of records placed on mobile shelves can exceed the weight bearing capacity of a floor and cause collapse. When plans for mobile or mechanized shelves are being reviewed, state officials must consult an engineer to determine if the floor is capable of supporting the estimated weight of records and shelves (see III-6). Another consideration is the prohibitive cost of moving when an agency relocates its offices.

5. **Rotating filing equipment** — This type of equipment uses motorized or power files and shelving. A motorized or power file consists of folders or trays placed on a shelf with each shelf assigned a location number. The user selects the location number of the corresponding file or item on a locator panel and the equipment rotates until the requested shelf is open to the user. The actual shelving unit is stationary; only the shelves move.

   Large quantities of records can be stored securely in a small space with this type of equipment. However, rotating filing equipment limits user access. It is also very heavy and may not be usable in some offices. Moreover, if the equipment becomes inoperative, files may be inaccessible to the user.

   Rotating filing equipment should only be considered for very large file operations in which equipment costs could be offset by significant space and labor savings. The general disadvantages of mobile shelving units also apply to rotating equipment.

6. **Equipment size** — Use of letter-size equipment is recommended wherever practical. Legal-size equipment should be used only in those instances in which more than one fifth of the files are legal-size, since a combined cost savings of at least 20 per cent can be realized by

using letter-size equipment and supplies. County officials, particularly purchasing agents, should discourage the use of legal-size documents, equipment and supplies.

Filing Supplies

Basic supplies for filing systems include folders, labels, guides, and charge-out cards or folders. Neatness should be consistently maintained in the preparation of file folders. For example, labels should be typed and affixed in the same position on each folder. The use of straight-edge folders, — i.e., folders in which the tab spans the entire length, is recommended. This aids eye contact for file retrieval. File folders should never be overcrowded. The average folder can hold about three-quarters of an inch of paper, or approximately 75 sheets. A new folder should be used when the number of items needed to be filed becomes greater than three-quarters of an inch.

File folders come in a variety of styles. For general use throughout the filing system, 11 point reinforced tab, straight-edge cut, i.e., square cut, Kraft folders are preferred. Point size refers to the thickness of file folder stock, e.g., one point is .001 inch. This type of folder is sturdy and its dark color does not show soiling as easily as manila folders.

Other types of folders commonly used in filing systems include:

1. **Light weight manila folders** — best used for materials with a low reference rate,

2. **18 point Kraft folders** — useful for records with longer retention periods (over 5 years) and high reference activity.

3. **25 point pressboard folders** — useful for records with very long retention periods and constant reference, and

4. **Suspension folders** — most often used in computer printout files and in many lateral and vertical file cabinets.

All folder types should be used carefully because file folders can occupy up to 40 per cent of the filing capacity of a cabinet. File folder guides should also be used to divide files into sections for easier reference and retrieval. Guides can indicate primary divisions, such as general subjects or secondary divisions, or more specific topics under the general subjects.

Vendor Selection

As with any considerations to use private vendors to provide equipment and supplies, county officials must first determine their filing system needs and develop options for achieving goals based on costs and budgetary levels, with due consideration given to projected rates of growth in active files.

After this process has been accomplished, officials will be capable of communicating their requirements accurately. Knowledge gained from files management is an assurance that a county agency or authority will not be overwhelmed by deft salesmanship and purchase file equipment or supplies that are unnecessary, costly or otherwise inappropriate. Preliminary research provides a basis for evaluating vendor services and ultimately saving tax dollars.

A vendor/client relationship need not be adversarial. Reputable vendors work diligently to accommodate their customer's needs, and officials can assist in the process by:

1. **Visiting an area installation**, and speaking to file system users to determine their satisfaction with a system, assessment of problems, etc. This information can be useful in modifying a proposal. Most vendors are eager to accommodate their customers and, provided that no conflict of interest occurs, their installations may be shown to other prospective customers.

2. **Obtaining information** from the vendor concerning who installs filing equipment, and what kind of warranty is given. For mobile systems, information requested should include details about disassembly and reassembly, as well as modularity, i.e., whether filing equipment can be updated or added to.

Vendors can offer additional helpful suggestions. These ideas should be evaluated on the basis of filing needs as discovered through file audits conducted as part of a files management program, or records inventories conducted as part of a general records management program.

Summary

One of the most effective records management techniques is the organization of active files through use of files management. Files management involves the analysis, preparation, and arrangement or classification of file series for rapid and easy retrieval of information. The files management process begins with a records inventory or a file audit. An inventory or audit yields an understanding of system needs and provides a basis for choosing equipment and supplies and qualifying vendors.

Periodic audits of active files, in conjunction with implementation of records retention schedules to purge inactive materials and transfer semi-current records to a records storage center or area, guarantee the continuation of economy and efficiency in active files.

Aiding county officials and their staff with the organization and maintenance of active files through files management is the work of the Bureau of Records Management. The bureau provides consultations and offers assistance in records management concerns, including files management, free of charge to state agencies and authorities.

To obtain assistance, call the Bureau of Records Management at (609) 530-3200, or write: New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 2300 Stuyvesant Avenue, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.